Gaetano Salvemini

Italians in the Spanish War [marzo-aprile 1937][*]

History repeats itself. In 1825 Italian exiles fought in Spain under the walls of Cadiz and Barcelona in the liberal ranks against the French army which had invaded Spain to restore King Ferdinand to the throne, and in this army other Italians fought, among them Charles Albert, the future king of Piedmont.

During the Carlist civil war from 1833 to 1840, Italian exiles again fought side by side with the liberals, while Charles Albert, now on the throne, aided the Carlists with arms, money, and diplomatic intrigues. "Next to God and my army," declared the Pretender, Don Carlos, "the greatest assistance has been rendered to my cause by the King of Piedmont."

In 1923 Mussolini received with favor Primo de Rivera's coup d'état. Vice versa, in 1926 Italian anti-Fascist exiles participated in the attempted uprising in Catalonia planned by Colonel Macia. In 1931 the downfall of the monarchy in Spain was regarded by both Fascists and anti-

[*] In Archivio Salvemini, II. Dall'esilio al secondo dopoguerra, busta 21/1, cc. 15 datt., con correzioni ms., non aut., num. [1]-3, 3 bis, 4-14. Cfr. I.S.R.T., *Archivio Gaetano Salvemini. I. Manoscritti e materiali di lavoro*, inventario a cura di S. Vitali, Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali – Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, Roma 1998, p. 202. Si tratta di un testo dattiloscritto di 15 pagine con correzioni probabilmente di Salvemini, ma dalla forma molto chiara; il che potrebbe far pensare ad una agevolazione per la lettura sia come lavoro di collaborazione per la traduzione sia come testo per propaganda o per conferenza finalizzato alla raccolta di finanziamenti pro Spagna in collegamento all'*Appello di «Giustizia e Libertà» agli italiani d'America perché aiutino la lotta in Spagna e in Italia*, «GL», Parigi, 5 febbraio 1937 (cfr. E. Signori, *Introduzione* a *Fra le righe. Carteggi fra Carlo Rosselli e Gaetano Salvemini* cit., pp. 78-83). I numeri delle pagine 3 (in luogo di 2, da "would not only make" a "across guarded Italian frontier"), 3 bis (da "Most of these volunteers" a "but hastened to Barcelona, where is") e 8 (da "Thus a / battalion" a " newspaper for libel") sono a penna, gli altri dattiloscritti, a segno forse di interventi sul testo che erano ancora in corso. Nelle note alfabetiche si segnalano i cambiamenti a penna apportati al testo dattilografato, che è stato riprodotto senza apportare alcuna modifica o correzione neppure in caso di eventuale errore (ad esempio: Nanetti per Nannetti, entrused per entrusted; surrended per surrendered; divergencies per divergences; Caporettos per Caporetto). Come usuale nel suo metodo di lavoro, di cui questo testo può rappresentare un buon esempio di "prima stesura" (cfr. Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo*, I, a cura di R. Vivarelli, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1961, pp. xii-xiv), Salvemini ne avrebbe riutilizzato lunghe parti in *Carlo e Nello Rosselli – A Memoir*, Londra, edizioni di «Giustizia e Libertà», [marzo 1938], ora nel capitolo *8. Abissinia e Spagna*, in Salvemini, *Carlo e Nello Rosselli*, in Id., *Scritti vari (1900-1957)*, a cura di G. Agosti e A. Galante Garrone, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1978, pp. 701-706 (in specifico: da «At the end of July» a «with patriotic traditions» alle pp. 702-703; da «In October 1936 it appeared» a «all were respected» alla p. 704; da «In March 1937» a «they fought for a whole week» alle pp. 705-706, qui segnalate rispettivamente alle note numeriche 1, 2 e 4 indicandone l'inizio e la fine). Per la possibile datazione tra il marzo e l'aprile 1937, nel testo salveminiano l'ultimo avvenimento è la battaglia di Guadalajara (8-23 marzo 1937), e non si accenna invece ad Antonio Cieri, anarchico caduto il 10 aprile 1937 (data del comunicato ufficiale; in «GL», 16 aprile 1937); risulta poi una citazione letterale ivi compreso l'errore di ortografia sul nome di Nannetti, nella parte finale del testo salveminiano, di Alberto Cianca, *Volontari antifascisti in Ispagna. Valencia, febbraio (ritardata)*, «Giustizia e Libertà», IV, 10, 5 marzo 1937 («Pure sul fronte di Madrid una formazione spagnola è comandata da un giovane italiano: il tenente colonnello Nino Nanetti; così come sul fronte di Aragona un largo reparto di truppe catalane è agli ordini di Rosario Palumbo, reduce dalle due battaglie di Irùn e di Huesca», si veda nota 3 al testo; ma cfr. anche «GL», n. 9, 26 febbraio 1937 per le notizie sul Battaglione "Garibaldi"; e cfr. *Antifascisme italien en Espagne*, in «Fascisme et Italie. Bi-mensuel de "Giustizia e Libertà"», I, n. 1, 1937, in coda al n. 11, 12 marzo 1937 nella edizione «GL» di Feltrinelli reprint del 1966, per la citazione dell'elogio alle truppe italiane di Macnamara); si aggiunga infine che, da una lettura delle buste 21/2 e 21/3 dell'Archivio contenenti appunti per conferenze e di studio sulla guerra di Spagna che vanno dal '36 a oltre il '37 (cfr. I.S.R.T., *Archivio Gaetano Salvemini*, cit., pp. 202-203), ma che non riprendono in alcuna parte il testo qui pubblicato, Salvemini risulta essersi allontanato da Cambridge proprio alla fine di aprile, o inizio maggio, avendo riutilizzato sia il retro della lettera con la quale Frieda Wunderlich lo ringraziava dell'imminente prestito della sua camera all'università («IV 19 1937. Dear Mr. Salvemini, I thank you very much for your great kindness to allow me the use of your room. You need not clean anything up for me. It is a great convenience for me to roost in a private room in the university. Thank you for helping me in this way. We missed you very much at our celebration. With kindest regards, cordially Frieda Wunderlich, Johnson Hall, 411 West 116th Street, New York»), sia parecchi foglietti intestati "The Charles, 3333 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Md" con citazioni dal New York Herald Tribune, dal New York Times, e altri giornali di quei mesi. Ringrazio il «Comitato per la pubblicazione delle opere di Gaetano Salvemini» per l'autorizzazione alla stampa e per la gentile ospitalità all'Archivio dell'Istituto storico della Resistenza in Toscana.

Fascists, in Italy and abroad, as a defeat for Mussolini. But the Spanish elections of 1933, which swept the Right into power, were a victory for him. A document of indubitable authenticity, recently published by the Spanish Government, has revealed that on March 31, 1934 Mussolini entered into an engagement with General Barrera and other leaders of the Spanish anti-Republican groups, pledging himself to furnish them immediately with 1,500,000 pesetas, 20,000 guns, 20,000 hand grenades, and 200 mitrailleuses for the purpose of bringing about the overthrow of the Republic and the restoration of monarchy: "this aid had only a preliminary character and would be followed at the suitable time by a still more substantial assistance, in the measure in which the work accomplished justified it, and in which circumstances rendered it necessary."

In the summer of 1936 the time to keep those promises arrived. In the first weeks of the Spanish civil war Mussolini sent[a] the insurgents pursuit and bombing planes, artillery, ammunition, specialists in motorized warfare, and small contingents of men. Italian aeroplanes and troops led by Italian officers contributed to the defence of Majorca and the reconquest of Ibiza.

Immediately the Italian exiles opposed their open intervention to the masked intervention of Mussolini. [1]At the end of July one of the groups in which the exiles are organized, "Giustizia e Libertà," launched an appeal for the formation of a legion of volunteers to fight as an Italian unit at the side of Spanish popular militias. The world had wished to ignore the 2000 Italians who had laid down their lives in Italy between 1921 and 1926, fighting against the Fascists; the 3000 Italians who from 1927 to 1936 had been sentenced by the Fascist Special Tribunal to an aggregate of thirty thousand[b] years' imprisonment; the thousands of men and women who had been interned on penal islands; and the thousands of intellectuals and workers in Italy who had accepted poverty rather than renounce their dignity as men. The anti-Fascists who went to fight in Spain would not only make[c] a demonstration of active solidarity with the Spanish people, but also show Mussolini and his admirers in other countries that Fascism has not been able to destroy among Italians the tradition of Mazzini and Garibaldi.

Neither the French nor the Spanish Governments were in favor of this undertaking. They raised the objection that Spain's need was for arms not for men. Moreover, they did not want to give Mussolini a pretext for intervention, just as if the dictator were not already intervening without any pretext at all. Even the leaders of the Communist Party in France opposed that first group of pioneers. They thought that only doctors, medicine, and foodstuffs should be sent to Spain. The first Italian anti-Fascists were able to reach Spain only because the Barcelona Government disobeyed the Madrid authorities and welcomed their aid. In France they had to travel singly to the Spanish frontier.

The first Italian unit, 150 strong, set out from Barcelona on August 19 for the Aragonese front. Democrats, socialists, communists who had revolted against the orders from their leaders[d], anarchists, forgetting party quarrels and doctrinal divergencies, had come together from the most diverse countries. Some had come from Italy, defying the dangers of a flight across the closely guarded Italian frontier. Most of these volunteers were mature men who had fought in the World War. All were prompted by strong political sentiments. They turned out to be very useful to the Spanish militias, who needed to learn the art of fighting without unnecessary sacrifices.

On the morning of August 28 the column had its baptism of fire near Almudevar, on the road between Huesca and Saragossa. Attacked by much more numerous and better equipped forces, after five hours' fighting they repulsed the assault, took some prisoners, and captured a cannon, some guns, and other war materials.

In the battle, together with other soldiers, fell the commander of the column, Mario Angeloni. He was born in a family in which democratic ideas were traditional. He had taken part as volunteer in the World War of 1914-18, with the rank of an officer, winning several medals for valor. In the years following the war he was an opponent of Fascism and sacrificed wealth and

---

[a] "confined himself to senting", cancellato

[1] Inizio, cfr. nota introduttiva.

[b] "3000", cancellato

[c] "intended not only to make", modificato.

[d] "who...leaders", aggiunto.

professional career to the political struggle. His law office and his house were looted several times, and he himself was wounded and banished from his city. At the end of 1926 he was arrested, sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and sent to the Island of Lipari. In the spring of 1932 he succeeded in escaping from Italy to France. When the Spanish revolution broke out, Angeloni was ill. He did not wait for recovery but hastened to Barcelona, where his ability as an organizer marked him out to be the commander of the first Italian unit. He fell while he was leading the assault upon an enemy tank.

After Angeloni's death the Italian column passed under the command of Carlo Rosselli, who had been wounded in the same action. Rosselli belongs to a rich family with patriotic traditions[1]; Mazzini died at Pisa in the house of a Rosselli. Rosselli wished to devote himself to the study of economics but in 1925 he gave up his studies in order to throw himself into the struggle against Fascism. He founded a review which after a few months was suppressed. In July 1925 his house in Florence was sacked, and in October of that year he escaped death as if by a miracle. Obliged to abandon Florence, he was several times attacked at Genoa, where he had established himself. In November he organized the flight from Italy of Filippo Turati, the former leader of Italian socialism. Having taken his friend to safety, he returned to Italy, was arrested, took all the responsibility for his acts in a trial which has become famous, and after ten months in prison was sent to the island of Lipari[e]. His flight from Lipari in 1929 has been related by his two companions, Nitti and Lussu. In Paris he became the soul of a new anti-Fascist group, “Giustizia e Libertà” (Justice and Liberty). A lively writer and controversialist, he directs a weekly newspaper bearing the same name as the group. He was expelled from Switzerland for having organized in 1930 the flight of an aeroplane which dropped thousands of anti-Fascist manifestoes on the city of Milan. In 1931 he was arrested in Germany for attempting to organize an exploit of the same type. It was he who sent out the first call for the formation of the Italian exiles' column.

Between September and December 1936 the column suffered many grievous losses. On September 2 Mario Rietti died. This young man came from a family of rich Milanese manufacturers. He was a communist sympathizer. From a special correspondent of the “Daily Express” and other English newspapers he had become a combatant. Another loss was that of Romeo Pontoni, a workman. His legs were blown off by the explosion of a grenade, but he managed to ask his comrades for a pencil and piece of paper on which to write his last farewell to his wife and children, and died crying “Long live liberty!”.

In November, in conjunction with Catalonian units, the Italian column occupied the station of Almudevar. The lack of troops for reinforcements prevented it from pushing the action to the limit. The Manchester Guardian emphasized the moral value and practical importance of that first Italian column.

At the same time other Italians were going to Spain one by one, joining other groups that were fighting. In September there were on the aviation field of Madrid eighteen Italian exiles: pilots, gunners, observers, and mechanics. Others fought at Irun, on the Guadarrama, in the Asturias.

On September 15, near Peguerinos, on the Guadarrama front, Fernando de Rosa met his death. Born at Milan in 1908, he belonged to the generation which had grown up in Italy under the Fascist climate. While he was studying at the University of Turin, he had become a militant anti-Fascist. Profiting by his skill as an alpine-climber, he acted as a liaison agent between the anti-Fascists living in Italy and those of the emigration. Discovered, he fled across the Alps. On October 24, 1929, at Brussels, as a protest against the support which the monarchy of Savoy had given to Fascism, he fired a revolver shot from a great distance during a ceremony in which the hereditary prince of Italy was participating. Released from prison in October 1934, he went to Spain and took

[...]

[1] Fine, cfr. nota introduttiva.

[e] “of Lipari”, aggiunto.